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Underworld

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Summary

Depictions of the underworld, in ancient Greek and Roman textual and visual sources, differ significantly from source to source, but they all draw on a common pool of traditional mythic motifs. These motifs, such as the realm of Hades and its denizens, the rivers of the underworld, the paradise of the blessed dead, and the places of punishment for the wicked, are developed and transformed through all their uses throughout the ages, depending upon the aims of the author or artist depicting the underworld. Some sources explore the relation of the world of the living to that of the dead through descriptions of the location of the underworld and the difficulties of entering it. By contrast, discussions of the regions within the underworld and existence therein often relate to ideas of afterlife as a continuation of or compensation for life in the world above. All of these depictions made use of the same basic set of elements, adapting them in their own ways to describe the location of, the entering into, and the regions within the underworld.

Keywords
underworld, Hades, afterlife, Tartarus, Charon, Elysium, Isles of the Blessed

The world of the dead is self-evidently not in the world of the living, for the dead are, by definition, no longer among the living. If those who have died are imagined to continue to exist, they must exist in some other place. Since the bodies of the dead are often placed under the earth, the realm of the dead is often imagined to be under the earth as well, in some underworld realm, but the land of the dead may also be imagined far off in other directions, beyond the encircling oceans, west of the sunset, or even up in the heavens. Although scholars have tried to trace an evolution of ideas of the place of the dead, from a uniformly dismal underworld as depicted in Homer to a polarised split between a dark, fiery underground hell full of torments and a bright, delightful heaven in the celestial realms, such a teleological scheme leading up to the Christian vision articulated most famously by Dante seems unwarranted by the evidence surviving from Classical antiquity. Rohde, for example, imagined an invasion of foreign Dionysiac religion into Greece that produced a revolution away from Homeric ideas of death and afterlife, while Cumont likewise attributed the spread of more positive ideas of the world of the dead from oriental influences, a light from the east that illuminated the bleak, dark underworld concepts of the Roman empire (see death, attitudes to, Greek). Although their historical premises have been discredited, and their more simplistic models of cultural transmission superseded, the developmental model persists even in recent scholarship. Such a linear narrative, however, threatens to obscure the variety that existed in the ways the underworld was imagined in every period of the Greek and Roman cultures.

The depictions of the underworld, in textual and visual sources, differ significantly from source to source. While the material remains from funerary practices obviously provide some information about the way that the relation of the living and the dead was imagined, they furnish little clear evidence of how the underworld itself was imagined, in the ways that iconographic or textual representations of the underworld do. The differences in emphasis or detail in these descriptions depend upon the aims of the author or artist depicting the underworld, but they all draw on a common pool of mythic motifs, developed and transformed through all their uses throughout the ages. Comic writers used the motifs for humorous purposes, just as epic, lyric, or tragic poets used them for their own devices, and philosophic authors shaped them to suit their own arguments. Later authors and artists drew upon the earlier uses, especially in Homer, as they made their changes; Roman authors drew on the earlier Greek tradition, even while they adapted the images with Roman names and other elements of Roman culture. Some sources explore the relation of the world of the living to that of the dead through descriptions of the location of the underworld and the difficulties of entering it. By contrast, discussions of the regions within the underworld and existence therein often relate to ideas of afterlife as a continuation of or compensation for life in the world above. All of these depictions make use of the same basic set of elements, adapting them in their own ways to describe the location of, the entering into, and the regions within the underworld.

Locating the Underworld

In many accounts, the dead are within the realm of Hades (Ἅιδης), whose name is often connected with the un-seen (ἀιδής), as the dead in his realm are beyond the sight of the living, and this unseen realm is imagined in many different ways. The king of the underworld is always Hades, brother of Zeus, often called Plouton (Pluto, Orcus, or Dis for the Romans). Homer refers to the division of the cosmos among the sons of Kronos (*Il*. 15.187–193), recounting that the earth is shared by all, while Poseidon receives the seas, Zeus the air, and Hades the realm beneath the earth. Accordingly, when mortals die, they are often said to go down under the earth, and the realm of Hades is as far below the earth as the earth itself is below Olympus where the gods dwell (*Od*. 10.560, 11.65; *Il*. 8.13–17). Hesiod claims that an anvil, falling from Olympus for nine days, would reach the earth on the tenth, and it could continue to fall another nine days into the underworld, only reaching the bottom of the gulf of Tartarus on the tenth (*Th*. 720–725). Persephone (Roman Proserpina), whom Hades carried off from her mother, Demeter (Ceres), is the Queen of the Underworld, and her position in the underworld often appears even more important than that of Hades himself. Sources name various entrances to the subterranean realm from the upper world, but among the most famous are Taenarum and Avernus, the entrances used by Heracles and Aeneas in their descents (Pind. *Pyth*. 4.43–44, Aristoph. *Ran*. 187; Sen. *Herc. Fur*. 662–678; Verg. *Aen*. 3.442, 6.126; Ov. *Met*. 14.101–119).

In other cosmological models, the unseen underworld appears not below the ground but rather up above, where the airy souls rise into the celestial realms, as in the 5th century BCE epigram for the Athenian war dead at Potideia (IG I^3 1179.6). Such visions keep many of the same geographical markers, but transpose all the locations into the realms of the moon and sun and stars (e.g., Plut. *de facie* 942d–945d, *de sera* 563f–568a, *de genio* 590b–592e). Plato's Timaeus claims that souls return after death to their own stars, and the Milky Way becomes the

path the souls tread (*Tim*. 41d–42b; Heraclides Ponticus fr. 96 = Philoponus, *In Arist. Meteor,* 117; Cicero *de Rep*. 6.16 [http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/cicero/repub6.shtml]).

Other descriptions place the realm of the dead far away beyond the waters of Ocean that encircle the earth, usually in the uttermost west beyond the setting sun. Circe provides Odysseus with careful instructions and a divine wind to sail beyond the waters of Ocean, and Hermes leads the souls of the slain suitors beyond the Ocean to the western gates of the sun (*Od.* 10.508–515, 24.11–12). The final boundaries of the world of the living are marked by the flows of the rivers of the underworld: Acheron, fiery Pyriphlegethon, Cocytus, and Styx (*Od.* 10. 513–514). Hesiod too puts the entrance to the underworld beyond the gates of Night and Day at the ends of the earth (*Th*. 731, 748–750),while Aristophanes locates the underworld on the other side of a vast voyage across the watery abyss, which comically turns out to be a small frog-infested pond (*Ran*. 137–139). The distance from the ordinary world to the realm of the dead may be marked by the other lands through which the traveller must pass. Odysseus journeys beyond the Ocean and the ever-shadowed land of the Cimmerians, whereas Hermes leads the suitors past the Land of Dreams (*Od.* 11.13–19, 24.1112). Sleep is always the nearest thing to death, and Aeneas exits from the underworld through the gates of dreams (Vergil *Aen*. 6. 893–899; cf. *Od.* 19.562–563).

Aeneas has his Sibyl to guide him into this unfamiliar realm, while Hermes, who appears as the psychopomp or guide of souls in many sources, both textual and visual, leads the souls of the recently deceased to the underworld (*Od.* 24. 1–13, cf. LIMC s.v. Hermes). At times, however, the dead are brought to the underworld by the fates of Death, the Keres, or by Death personified, Thanatos (*Il.* 2.302, *Od*. 14. 207). The journey of the newly dead to the underworld often seems automatic and almost instantaneous, in contrast to the elaborate descriptions of shades being led by Hermes. Aeschylus' Telephus claims that the path to Hades is simple, and poor Elpenor arrives at Hades more swiftly by falling to his death off Circe's roof than Odysseus and the rest of the crew do by sailing there across the Ocean, even aided by a divine wind (Plato, *Phaedo* 108a ; *Od*. 11. 57–58. Aristophanes characteristically takes this concept further, so when Dionysus asks the quickest way to Hades, his Heracles provides a whole list of ways to commit suicide (*Ran*. 117–135).

Plato's Socrates, however, rejects Telephus' claim that the path to Hades is simple, citing the need for daimonic guides attested in the rites and myths, who direct the soul among the multiple paths and turnings (*Phaedo* 108a). Such daimonic guides appear in other evidence as well (Menander fr. 551 Kock = Plut. *de tranq*. 474b, Lysias *Epitaphios* 78, Heraclitus fr. 119), and some of the so-called "Orphic" gold tablets direct the deceased not to take the path to the spring by the white cypress but to proceed further along to the Lake of Memory (B1, B2, B10 in Edmonds, 2011). Aeneas' Sibyl warns that, although the path into the underworld is easy, he will need good guidance to make his way out again (Vergil *Aen*. 6.125–148).

Entering the Underworld

The way to enter the underworld depends on where the underworld is located and how its border is marked. Patroclus complains to Achilles that, until he is buried, the shades of the dead will not let him cross the river and enter the gates of Hades (*Il.* 23. 71–76), and both water barriers and gated walls appear as obstacles throughout the tradition of depictions of the underworld.

If the watery boundary of the underworld is a river (Styx or, in other sources, Acheron), then a simple ferry, rather than an ocean-going vessel like Odysseus,' is needed. Athena personally

helps Heracles cross the Styx (*Il.* 8.362–369), but Pindar mentions an Acherusian ferry (fr. 143 = Plut. *de superst.* 167f). Although his first appearance in extant literature is in the parody version of Aristophanes (*Ran*. 181), the ferryman Charon appears earlier in vase paintings and in the lost epic *Minyas*, which probably described the descent to the underworld of Heracles or Theseus and Perithous (*Minyas* fr. 1 = Paus. 10.28.2 ; cf., LIMC s.v. Charon). Charon and his ferry become a standard part of underworld geography in later descriptions, whether heroic epics like Vergil or comic parodies, like those of Lucian, who spins endless jokes involving the curmudgeonly old ferryman (Vergil, *Aen*. 6. 298–304; Lucian *dMort*, *Charon*).

The wide gates of Hades appear as a proverb for death, since all mortals must pass through them (*Il.* 5.646, 23.71–76, and so the underworld is surrounded by walls that force all comers to pass through the gates. Hesiod describes the gates of bronze that close the triple layered bronze walls that surround the underworld as a prison of the rebellious Titans, and the high walls of Hades mark the separation of the living from the dead (*Th*. 726–733, cf. Vergil *Aen*. 6. 548–554). The gates are watched, in many sources, by some kind of gatekeeper or guardian, either a terrifying monster or a less horrific functionary.

The hero Aeacus, son of Zeus, is the most frequent doorkeeper; according to some sources, he was granted this role for his exceptional virtue, and he appears as a semi-divine figure who receives cult as κλειδοῦχος, keeper of the keys (Isocrates 9.14–15 ; Apollodorus 3.12.6, Herodotus 5.89.3, CIG iii.6298, Epig. Gr. 646, PMG IV.1264). In comic sources, this revered figure appears as a door-keeping slave, with all the foibles associated with that role (Lucian *dMort*. 13.3, 20.1, 6, 22.3, *deLuc*t. 4, *Philops*. 25; probably already in Aristophanes *Ran*. 605–673), but in other traditions he appears as one of the judges of the underworld (Plato, *Apol*. 41a, *Gorgias* 524a; Horace *Carm*. 2.13.22; Ovid *Met*. 13.25–26; Seneca *Apoc*. 14.1–4). The goddess Hecate is also called the keeper of the keys to the gates of Hades (e.g. PGM IV.2292), perhaps in conjunction with her role as guardian of thresholds. In the "Orphic" gold tablets, guardians appear to challenge the deceased on her journey into the underworld and ask her identity, but these guardians have neither names nor descriptions, simply embodying the sentry's "halt, who goes there?" (B1, B2, B10 mention guardians, while B3–9 and 12, just have the question).

More daunting are some of the monstrous figures who lurk at the gates of Hades, notably the hellhound Cerberus, a ferocious beast endowed with three (or fifty or even a hundred) heads (*Od.* 11.623–626; 3 heads –; Verg. *Aen*. 6.417–423; Sen. *Herc. f*. 782–806; 50—Hesiod, *Th*. 310–312; 100—Pind. *Dith*. 2, fr. 249b). Hesiod describes his cruel trick of fawning like a friendly dog at those entering, only to savagely devour anyone who tries to come out (*Th*. 769–773), but other monsters simply stay terrifying, like the Gorgon, whose petrifying countenance Odysseus fears will rise out of the underworld (*Od*. 11.633–5). While the function of horrific creatures like Eurynomus, Empousa, Echidna, Hydra, and others seems mostly to add terror to the scene, some of these monsters, like the Erinyes or the Poinai, also act as punishers beneath the earth (Paus. 10.28.7; Aristophanes *Ran*. 289–304, 465–478; *Il.* 3.276–80; 19.259–60; [Plato] *Axiochus* 372a, Vergil *Aen*. 6.570–627).

Within the Underworld

Within the gates, different regions of the underworld provide different experiences, ranging from the most horrible torments in the foulest conditions to blissful enjoyment of paradise, and the powers that rule the underworld determine where each person in the underworld belongs. While

some sources dwell on the process of judgment, others elaborate upon the descriptions of the regions of the underworld. Some sources carefully differentiate the regions of the afterlife, but others deliberately flatten out the differences to provide a uniform afterlife for all.

The fear of torment inflicted by underworld punishers, monstrous or otherwise, appears in a number of sources as a cause for the fear of death, as wrongdoers suffer for the crimes they committed in life (Plato *Rep.* 330d, cf. [Dem.] 25.52; Democritus 199, 297DK = Stob. III.4.73, IV.34.62; P. Derv. col. 5. 6–10). At times, a formal process of judgment is imagined, either by the divine rulers of the underworld themselves or by divine heroes. Aeacus, who in life settled disputes between the gods (Pindar *Isthm.* 8.21,is sometimes named, but more often the judge is Minos or Rhadamanthys. Minos appears in Homer, judging lawsuits brought by one dead person against another as he had as a king in life, but Plato provides the first reference to him judging individual souls as they enter the underworld, along with Aeacus and Rhadamanthys (*Od*. 11.568–575, Plato *Gorgias* 524a, cf. *Apol*. 41a,which also names the Eleusinian Triptolemus). Rhadamanthys also presides over the happy dead in Pindar, but the judge beneath the earth who sends the fortunate dead to him is unspecified (*Olymp*. 2. 75; 56–67). In Aeschylus, either Hades himself or "another Zeus beneath the ground" serves to judge and punish wrongdoers (Aeschylus *Eumenides* 273–274;*Suppliants* 230–231).

The realm of Hades is often described as dark or shadowy, as befits an underground realm, but beyond the gates and halls of Hades and Persephone, the land often appears as meadows or other gentle territory. The dead dwell in the meadows of asphodel in Homer, while the great hunter Orion ranges over hills in continued pursuit of game (*Od.* 11.539–575, 24.14. A wall painting in Delphi by the 5th century BCE artist Polygnotus (now lost but described in detail by Pausanias) includes a number of natural features, such as rocky outcrops and trees, that provide places for the inhabitants to sit or stand (Paus. 10.28–31).

Polygnotus' painting, like many images of the underworld that appear on surviving vases, does not make spatial separation between the dead, who simply continue the mode of existence that they had while living, and those who are suffering punishments in the underworld in compensation for their crimes in life. Homer too has his famous wrongdoers, Tantalus, Sisyphus, and Tityos suffering their punishments right alongside the other dead (*Od.* 11.576–600).Other textual sources draw sharper distinctions, however, describing the places of torment as full of mud and filth (cf. Aristophanes *Ran*. 145–146that are apart from the more pleasant areas reserved for the blessed dead. In his *Phaedo*, Plato transforms the rivers of the underworld from boundaries to the places of punishment themselves; Pyriphlegethon becomes a river of burning lava that roasts wrongdoers, Cocytus freezes others as they are carried through the circulating waters of the underworld, while Tartarus buffets the worst endlessly up and down in a perpetual whirlpool of torment (*Phaedo* 111c–114c[). The regions of punishment are at times labelled separately as Erebos or even Tartarus, although Tartarus is reserved in some sources as the deepest pit where the Titans or other divine prisoners are confined (cf. *Il.* 8.10–16,14.274–279, 8.478–491, 5.898; Hesiod *Th*. 713–745, *Hom. Hymn Apollo* 335–336)_. In addition to Homer's trio of Tityus, Tantalus, and Sisyphus, Ixion is often depicted, bound on a flaming wheel, while others (sometimes specifically labelled the Danaides) try endlessly to fill a leaking jar by carrying water in sieves. Not just famous individuals, but certain types of wrongdoers are often depicted suffering compensatory punishments for their wrongdoings in life, and the specific types described depend not so much on the date or the genre of the source but rather on who the author of the vision thinks is most deserving of retribution (e.g., Polygnotus in Paus. 10.28.4–5; [Plato] *Axiochus* 371e; Vergil *Aen*. 6.576–627).

The torments of wrongdoers getting their due are described more often and in more detail than the rewards of the righteous, but the realm of the dead also includes regions where the good may dwell in paradise in compensation for the good lives they have lived, whether through virtuous actions or through their special connections developed with the gods through ritual performance, in sacrifices, or even in "mystery" rites. Homer's description of the Elysian Field, to which Menelaus will go, is similar to Hesiod's description of the Isles of the Blessed, a land of endlessly pleasant climate where no work is needed (*Od.* 4.561–569,Hesiod *W&D* 169–173). Pindar provides descriptions of the blessed afterlife as an aristocratic paradise, where the dead can ride horses, play games, and enjoy feasting in flowery fields under the light of the sun (Pindar, fr. 129, 130, cf. *Olymp*. 2. 71–77). The happy dead get to spend the afterlife enjoying the best times of life, celebrating festivals with dancing and drinking, and the symposium of the blessed dead is an idea that appears in many contexts, from tomb reliefs to the parody in Aristophanes (*Ran*. 316–459,*Axiochus* 371c). These sunlit fields may be alongside the murky mud in the underworld (Aristophanes *Ran*. 326, Polygnotus in Paus. 10.27–31, Vergil *Aen*. 6.637–642, OF340 B apud Proclus *In remp* 2.340.14–20) or they may be separated, off along a different path, or out in the Ocean on the Isles of the Blessed (cf. Plato *Gorgias* 523b). In the *Phaedo*, Plato puts the realms of the blessed dead not in the underworld but in the purer air of the *aither* above the earth, and this ethereal destination for the souls of the dead appears in earlier inscriptions as well (e.g., IG I^3 1179, SEG 38 440; cf. Eur. fr. 971, *Suppl*. 1140[, 531–536).

A few fortunate individuals are transformed from mortals into gods, but Odysseus sees the shade of Heracles in Hades, even though his divine portion resides above with the gods on Olympus (*Od.* 11.602–604. Other such fortunate individuals as Ino, Kleitos, Tithonus, and Ganymede do not seem to have any presence in the underworld, but Semele, the mother of Dionysus, dwells in the underworld until her son descends to bring her up to Olympus (*Od.* 5.333–335, 15.250–251, 5.1, *Il.* 20.231–235, 5.265; Pindar *Olymp.* 2. 25–30). Some of the "Orphic" gold tablets promise apotheosis for the deceased—"a god you will be instead of a mortal"—but others of the same type ask Persephone to send the deceased to the seats of the blessed (A1 and A4; A2 and A3 in Edmonds, 2011).

Homer's famous vision of pale, gibbering shades that lack any vitality or memory is actually the exception to the lively afterlife in the underworld that appears in many sources. The pathetic scenes with Patroclus and Achilles or Odysseus and his mother emphasise the idea that existence after death is empty, to show the epic idea that the only meaningful kind of immortality is imperishable fame, the κλέος ἄφθιτον provided by epic song (*Il.* 23.103–104; *Od.* 11.218–222). Elsewhere, the dead either continue in the underworld with same kind of existence they had while alive or experience rewards or punishments in compensation, depending on the purposes of the creator of the vision of the underworld. Homer's influence is strong in the literary tradition, but the underworld appears in many other kinds of sources in the Greek and Roman cultural traditions, transformed in different ways over the centuries to make a variety of points about the relation of life and death.

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